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Edward Larrabee Barnes, Modern Architect, Dies at 89

By Douglas Martin

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Edward Larrabee Barnes, a New York architect who cherished the ideals of clarity and functionality he learned from the Modernist masters even as he devised novel approaches to designing houses, campuses, museums, churches and skyscrapers, died on Tuesday in Cupertino, Calif. He was 89 and lived in Cambridge, Mass. The cause was complications of a stroke, said his son, John.

For the half-century following World War II, Mr. Barnes's prodigious output included the I.B.M. corporate headquarters in Manhattan, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Dallas Museum of Art, the Thurgood Marshall Federal Judiciary Building in Washington, the I.B.M. World Trade Center in Mount Pleasant, N.Y., and the Sarah M. Scaife Gallery at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh.

His many master plans included work for the State University of New York at Potsdam and Purchase, Yale, Colonial Williamsburg and the National University of Singapore. He also made his mark on the the Chicago Botanic Garden and the New York Botanical Garden.

His Haystack Mountain School of Arts and Crafts on Deer Isle, Me., built in 1962, was not a building but a village of shingled cottages linked by a grid of wooden decks leading to a spectacular ocean view. Its diagonal forms were a much-noted departure from the cubical massing of the International Style that prevailed at the time. In 1994, the American Institute of Architects honored the project's influence with its 25-Year Award for older buildings, calling it "an early and profound example of the fruitful and liberating fusion of the vernacular building traditions with the rationality and discipline of Modern architecture."

Speaking of Haystack in 1989, Mr. Barnes told *Architecture* magazine, "I've always been drawn to making things as simple as possible, if you can do that without making them inhuman or dull or oppressive."

As a student at the Harvard Graduate School of Design just before World War II, Mr. Barnes was inspired by Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer to pursue the sleek

Modernist vision, characterized by an aversion to ornament and the so-called "honest" expression of function. His loyalty to the movement proved stronger than that of some other better-known Modernist figures like Philip Johnson, who embraced more eclectic postmodernism in the 1980's.

Mr. Barnes's 1983 headquarters for I.B.M. at Madison Avenue and 57th Street in Manhattan may have had five sides -- which some purists viewed as a violation of the Modernist ideal of the box -- but it conspicuously lacked the playful and controversial faux-historic references of Mr. Johnson's nearby AT&T building, now the Sony building, that was erected around the same time.

Mr. Barnes's style was so understated that some suggested he almost lacked one. Peter Blake, the architect and critic, chose to praise Mr. Barnes for successfully juggling the many considerations faced by today's architects, from cost to clients to location to zoning to image -- devilish details that, he dryly noted, would confound Michelangelo and the historic masters.

In the introduction to the book "Edward Larrabee Barnes: Architect," which Mr. Barnes published in 1994 at the time of his retirement, Mr. Blake said that Mr. Barnes sacrificed "a personal signature" in order to make "a more selfless contribution."

"He seems to have grasped what few others understood as clearly or creatively -- that a designed building in a participatory democracy, should respond to a great variety of factors and that its ultimate form should express those conditions and demands rather than provide a memorial to its architect or to those who paid the bill," Mr. Blake wrote.

Many believed that Mr. Barnes attained his reputation as a world-class architect with his highly acclaimed Walker Art Center in 1971, which is still considered one of the most appealing environments for contemporary art in the United States. It is characterized its white-on-white loft spaces. The galleries rise in the form of a helix.

Writing in The New York Times, Hilton Kramer called it "a far better place" to look at paintings than either Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim or Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's National Gallery in Berlin.

Mr. Barnes never lost interest in building private homes, even when he was awash with corporate clients. Over the years, his houses evolved from one-level horizontal structures to buildings with towers and extended wings to connect the home to the site at different vertical levels.

"They're a guaranteed money-loser," he said of houses in an interview with The Saturday Review in 1981, "but I never want to give them up because of the richness and complexity involved."

Edward Larrabee Barnes was born in Chicago on April 22, 1915, to a family he described as "incense-swinging High Episcopalians." His mother, the former Margaret Helen Ayer, won a Pulitzer Prize for the novel "Years of Grace." His father, Cecil, was a lawyer.

Mr. Barnes began studying English at Harvard, switching to art history and finally to the history of architecture. After graduation, in 1938, he taught English for a year at the Milton Academy, in Massachusetts, which he had attended. His visits to the houses that Gropius and Breuer built in nearby Lincoln persuaded him to be an architect, Mr. Blake wrote.

After receiving his architecture degree from Harvard design school in 1942, he served in the Navy. Immediately after the war, he worked in Los Angeles for the industrial designer Henry Dreyfuss designing prototypes for mass-produced homes.

When Washington stopped financing that initiative, Mr. Barnes went to Manhattan and opened his own architecture office in 1949. Nearly 500 architects, many of them prominent, were to work for the firm over its 45-year-existence.

"Like his Harvard mentor, Walter Gropius, Barnes may be remembered by future generations as much for the architects he helped train as for the buildings he created," Lester Korzilius, one of those architects, wrote in a glowing review in *Oculus* magazine of Mr. Barnes's book.

In 1944 he married the former Mary Elizabeth Coss, an architect who had worked with Alvar Aalto and others in putting together exhibitions for the Museum of Modern Art. She survives him, as do his son, John, of Davenport, Calif., and two granddaughters.

The architect couple lived in the predictably avant-garde Manhattan apartment. Mr. Blake wrote that to keep the place flawlessly neat, visitors were asked to trade in their shoes for Japanese slippers at the entrance. They added a house in Mount Kisco, in Westchester County, N.Y., in 1952. When it was built, the house was a classically modernist flat-roofed box set on a stone platform on the crest of a hill, *The Saturday Review* reported.

"The idea had to do with architecture as something isolated from nature," Mr. Barnes told the magazine. The basic raft was added to five times, with the help of John Barnes, also an architect.

One of Mr. Barnes's most famous designs was also in Westchester County: a master plan for the State University of New York at Purchase, in the late 1960's He designed some of the buildings and assigned others to top architects like Mr. Johnson. He required them all to use the same brown brick.

By the 1980's, architectural critics wrote that neither the ensemble nor the individual buildings worked very well. In 1981, Paul Goldberger, the architecture critic of *The New York Times*, likened the ubiquitous brown color scheme to the gray coats of paint that turned ocean liners into troop ships during World War II.

The next year, a 22-year-old art student protested by fitting out six windows with green shutters and checked curtains, hardly part of the Modernist vocabulary. Mr. Barnes allowed as how that seemed "a normal reaction."

He earlier told The Saturday Review that the buildings on the campus were "constipated, boiled to the point where there isn't much juice left." (He did not specify if he was including his own works in this assessment.) Mr. Barnes said his style was catalyzed by a visit in the late 1950's to Mykonos, which had earlier inspired Le Corbusier's elegantly spare vision. This influence helped Mr. Barnes develop what he saw as an architecture of three-dimensional volumes not just angles and planes, which can be seen in his skyscrapers, described by some as exercises in pure form. "Barnes' office towers are the embodiment of the late Modern development of the thin-skinned office tower as a taut technological membrane," the International Dictionary of Architects and Architecture said in 1993.

But there could be whimsy in these seemingly monolithic skyscrapers. In 1990, Mr. Goldberger said the cantilevered corner of the I.B.M. tower recalled a ballet dancer balanced on point.

Mr. Barnes thought buildings should speak for themselves, and made a clear distinction between what he called "architectural" ideas and "verbal" ideas. When the postmodernists were using words like "taxonomy" and "semiotics" and spoke of "deconstructing" buildings, Mr. Barnes spoke of "simplicity" and "lucidity."

He once said that most architectural ideas could be expressed on the back of an envelope.